order were often slow to be realized, and required political, ideological, and in some cases military mobilization. The pattern of decolonization in Africa was diverse, reflecting the attitudes of colonial powers, the nature of local nationalist or revolutionary movements, and in some cases the involvement of external states, including cold war protagonists. Tribal factors were also important in many cases. The most horrifying example of the political exploitation of tribal divisions came in the former Belgian colony, Rwanda, when in 1994 some 800,000–1,000,000 Tutsis were massacred by the Hutu majority (of whom an estimated 100,000 were also killed). Tutsi women were also subjected to mass rape, including for the purpose of spreading HIV/AIDS. To what extent the imperial powers created or exacerbated tribal divisions is an important question in examining the political stability of newly independent states. Equally important is the effectiveness of political leaders in these societies in tackling formidable political challenges and economic problems of poverty and underdevelopment.

In Asia, the relationship between **nationalism** and revolutionary **Marxism** was a potent force. In Malaya, the British defeated an insurgent communist movement (1948–60). In Indochina (1946–54) the French failed to do likewise. For the Vietnamese, centuries of foreign oppression—Chinese, Japanese, and French—soon focused on a new adversary: the United States. For Washington, early reluctance to support European imperialism gave way to incremental and covert involvement, and, from 1965, growing military commitment to the newly created state of South Vietnam. American leaders embraced a domino theory: if one state fell to communism, others would follow. Chinese and Soviet support for North Vietnam highlighted the cold war context. However, Washington failed to coordinate limited war objectives with an effective political strategy; once victory was no longer possible, it sought to disengage through 'peace with honor'. The 1968 Tet (Vietnamese New Year) offensive by the 'Viet Cong' guerrillas marked a decisive moment, convincing many Americans that the war would not be won, though it was not until 1973 that American forces finally withdrew, two years before South Vietnam collapsed.

The global trend towards decolonization was a key development in world politics in the twentieth century, one frequently shaped by both local circumstances and the international dynamics of the cold war. Yet, while imperialism withered, other forms of domination or control took shape. The term 'hegemony' emerged to critique the behaviour of the superpowers, notably Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and US hegemony in Central America.

Key Points

- Decolonization was founded on the principle of self-determination and marked the eclipse of European power.
- Different European powers had differing attitudes to decolonization after 1945: some sought to preserve their empires, in part (the French) or whole (the Portuguese).
- The process of decolonization was relatively peaceful in many cases; in others, it led to revolutionary wars (Algeria, Malaya, and Angola) whose scale and ferocity reflected the attitudes of the colonial powers and nationalist movements.
- Independence and national liberation became embroiled in cold war conflicts when the superpowers and/or their allies became involved, for example in Vietnam. Whether decolonization was judged successful depends, in part, on whose perspective you adopt—that of the European power, the independence movement, or the people themselves.

4.4 Cold war

The rise of the United States as a world power after 1945 was of paramount importance in international politics. Its relationship with the USSR provided a crucial dynamic in world affairs, one that affected—directly or indirectly—every part of the globe. In the West, historians have debated with vigour and acrimony who was responsible for the collapse of the wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington. The rise of the Soviet Union as a global power after 1945 was equally crucial. Moscow's relations with its Eastern European 'allies', the People's Republic of China (PRC), and revolutionary forces in the Third World were vital issues in world politics and key factors in Soviet–American affairs.

Some historians date the origins of the cold war to the Russian Revolution of 1917, while most focus on events between 1945 and 1950. Whether the cold war was inevitable, whether it was the consequence of mistakes and misperceptions, or whether it reflected the response of courageous Western leaders to malign and

aggressive Soviet intent, are central questions in debates about its origins and dynamics. For many years, these debates were supported by evidence from Western archives and sources and reflected Western assumptions and perceptions. With the end of the cold war, greater historical evidence has emerged of the motivations and perceptions of other states, notably those of the Soviet Union.

4.4.1 1945–53: onset of the cold war

The development of the cold war in Europe reflected failure to implement the principles agreed at the wartime conferences of Yalta and Potsdam. The future of Germany and that of various Central and Eastern European countries, notably Poland, produced growing tension between the former wartime allies. Reconciling principles of national self-determination with national security proved a formidable task. In the West, feeling grew that Soviet policy towards Eastern Europe was guided not by historic concern with security but by ideological expansion. In March 1947, the Truman administration justified limited aid to Turkey and Greece with rhetoric designed to arouse awareness of Soviet ambitions, and declared that America would support those threatened by Soviet subversion or expansion. The **Truman doctrine** and the associated policy of **containment** expressed the self-image of the US as inherently defensive. It was underpinned by the **Marshall Plan** for European economic recovery, proclaimed in June 1947, which was essential to the economic rebuilding of Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, democratic socialist and other anti-communist forces were undermined and eliminated as Marxist–Leninist regimes, loyal to Moscow, were installed. The exception was Yugoslavia, where the Marxist leader, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, consolidated his authority while maintaining independence from Moscow. Tito's Yugoslavia subsequently played an important role in the Third World's Non-Aligned Movement.

The first major confrontation of the cold war took place over Berlin in 1948. The former German capital was left deep in the heart of the Soviet zone of occupation, and in June 1948 Stalin sought to resolve its status by cutting communications with the West. A massive airlift kept West Berlin's population and its political autonomy alive. Stalin ended the blockade in May 1949. The crisis saw deployment of American long-range bombers in Britain, officially described as 'atomic-capable', although none were actually armed with nuclear weapons. US military deployment was followed by political commitment enshrined in the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO) created in April 1949. The key article of the treaty—an attack on one member would be treated as an attack on all—accorded with the principle of collective self-defence established in Article 51 of the UN Charter. In practice, the cornerstone of the alliance was the American commitment to defend Western Europe. This soon meant Washington's willingness to use nuclear weapons against Soviet 'aggression'. For Moscow, 'political encirclement' encompassed a growing military, and specifically nuclear, threat.

While the cold war originated in Europe, conflicts in Asia and elsewhere were also crucial. In 1949, the 30-year-long Chinese civil war ended in victory for the communists under Mao Zedong. This had a major impact on Asian affairs and perceptions in both Moscow and Washington. In June 1950, the North Korean attack on South Korea was interpreted as part of a general communist strategy and a test case for the United States and the United Nations to resist aggression. The resulting American and UN military commitment, followed in October 1950 by Chinese involvement, led to a war lasting three years in which over 3 million people died before pre-war borders were restored in an armistice. North and South Korea themselves remained locked in hostility, even after the end of the cold war.

Assessing the impact of the cold war on the Middle East is more difficult. The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 reflected the legacy of the Nazi genocide and the failure of British colonial policy. The complexities of Middle Eastern politics, diplomacy, and armed conflict in the years immediately after 1945 cannot be readily understood through the prism of Soviet–American ideological or geo-strategic conflict. Both Moscow and Washington supported the creation of Israel in previously Arab lands, although by the 1950s the Soviets supported Arab nationalism. The pan-Arabism of the charismatic Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, embraced a form of socialism, but one far removed from Marxism–Leninism. The state of Israel was created by force and owed its survival to a continuing capability to defend itself against adversaries who did not recognize the legitimacy of its existence. Israel developed relations with the British and the French, culminating in their secret agreement to attack Egypt in 1956. Over time, Israel built a more crucial relationship with Washington, with whom a de facto strategic

alliance emerged. Yet, Britain, France, and the United States also developed a complex web of relationships with Arab states, reflecting historical, strategic, and economic interests.

4.4.2 1953–69: conflict, confrontation, and compromise

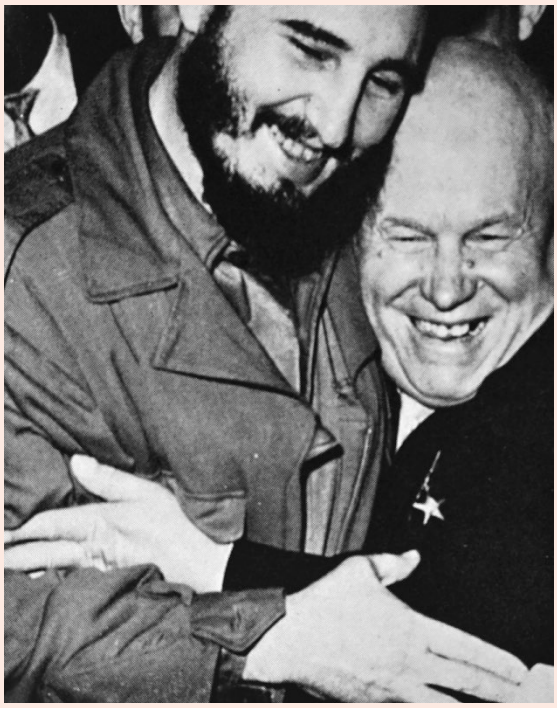
One consequence of the Korean War was the build-up of American forces in Western Europe, as communist aggression in Asia heightened perceptions of the Soviet threat to Europe. The idea that communism was a monolithic political entity controlled from Moscow became an enduring American fixation, not shared in London or elsewhere. Western Europeans nevertheless depended on Washington for military security, and this dependence grew as cold war confrontation in Europe deepened. The rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1954 precipitated the creation of the **Warsaw Pact** in 1955. Military build-up by Washington and Moscow continued apace, creating unprecedented concentrations of conventional and, moreover, nuclear forces. As the Soviets developed the capacity to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, the credibility of 'extended deterrence' was questioned as American willingness to risk 'Chicago for Hamburg' was called into doubt. The problem was exacerbated as NATO strategy continued to depend on American willingness not just to fight, but to initiate, nuclear war on Europe's behalf. By the 1960s, there were some 7,000 nuclear weapons in Western Europe alone. NATO deployed nuclear weapons to offset Soviet conventional superiority, while Soviet 'theatre nuclear' forces in Europe compensated for overall American nuclear superiority.

The death of Stalin in 1953 portended significant changes for the USSR at home and abroad. Stalin's eventual successor, Nikita Khrushchev, strove to modernize Soviet society, but helped unleash reformist forces in Eastern Europe. Moscow backed away from confrontation with Poland. However, the situation in Hungary threatened Soviet hegemony and, in 1956, intervention of the Red Army brought bloodshed to the streets of Budapest and international condemnation. Soviet intervention in Hungary coincided with the attack on Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel, precipitated by Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal. The British government's actions provoked fierce domestic and international criticism, and the most serious rift in the 'special relationship' between London and Washington. President Dwight D. Eisenhower strongly opposed his allies' action, and in the face of punitive American economic action, the British abandoned the operation (and their support for the French and Israelis). International opprobrium at Soviet action in Budapest was lessened and deflected by what many saw as the final spasm of European imperialism.

Khrushchev's policy towards the West combined a search for political coexistence with continued ideological confrontation. Support for national liberation movements aroused Western fears of a global communist challenge. American commitment to liberal democracy and national self-determination was often subordinated to cold war considerations, as well as to US economic and political interests. The cold war saw the growth of powerful intelligence organizations in both the US and USSR, whose roles ranged from estimating intentions and capabilities of adversaries to secret intervention in the affairs of other states. American hostility to Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba after 1959 and Cuba's growing relationship with Moscow (**see Case Study 4.1**) helped lay the foundations for the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Crises over Berlin in 1961 (**see Case Study 4.2**) and Cuba in 1962 marked the most dangerous moments of the cold war. In both, there was risk of direct military confrontation and, certainly in October 1962, the possibility of nuclear war. How close the world came to Armageddon, and exactly why peace was preserved, remain matters of debate among historians.

A more stable period of cold war coexistence and competition developed after 1962. Nevertheless, nuclear arsenals continued to grow. Whether this situation is best characterized as an arms race, or whether internal political and bureaucratic pressures drove the increases in nuclear stockpiles, is open to interpretation. For Washington, commitments to NATO allies also created pressures and opportunities to develop and deploy shorter-range ('tactical' and 'theatre') nuclear weapons. The nuclear dimension of world politics increased as other states joined 'the nuclear club': Britain (1952), France (1960), China (1964), India (1974), and Pakistan (1998). Israel and South Africa also developed nuclear weapons, though the South Africans dismantled theirs as apartheid ended. Growing concern at the spread of nuclear weapons led to negotiation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, whereby states with nuclear weapons committed themselves to halting the arms race, while those without promised to forego their development.

Case Study 4.1 Fidel Castro



Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) Premier of the Soviet Union, with Fidel Castro
© World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Fidel Castro remains an iconic figure of the twentieth century. A charismatic and impassioned orator, *El Barbudo* (The Bearded One) became a symbol of resistance to *Yanqui* (Yankee) imperialism and an inspiration to revolutionary socialists. Seizing power from a corrupt and brutal dictatorship in 1959, Castro led Cuba as prime minister, then president, for nearly fifty years. With his brother, Raúl, and the similarly iconic Che Guevara, he sought to promote revolution at home and abroad. And in the 1980s, Cuban combat troops fought in the Angolan civil war in support of Marxist protagonists against those backed by America (and apartheid South Africa).

Castro had no links with Moscow when he came to power, nor was he a member of the Cuban Communist Party. He embraced Marxism-Leninism (and physically embraced Nikita Khrushchev) as relations with the US collapsed and relations with Moscow flourished. Debate remains over whether a modus vivendi could have developed between Castro and Washington. Yet, radical agrarian reform and public ownership of Cuban industries threatened the interests of powerful American corporations. Americans also looked to the potential threat of revolutionary contagion across Latin America.

Meanwhile, rooting out dictator Fulgencio Batista's officials entailed large numbers of executions, and augured increasingly repressive measures against 'counter-revolutionaries', as control of the Cuban communist party was extended, and political freedoms undermined, precipitating an exodus of Cubans to the US. At the same time, Castro's pursuit of social justice meant significant and enduring advances in health care and literacy, especially for Cuba's peasants.

Critics argue that Havana was driven into the hands of Moscow by Washington. From March 1960, the CIA pursued regime change in Havana—including plots to assassinate Fidel Castro, even engaging the American mafia to murder him. In April 1961, a force of CIA-trained Cuban emigres landed at the Bay of Pigs hoping to provoke a popular uprising. They were heavily defeated. Secret American attempts to overthrow Castro nevertheless continued, and the US sought to isolate Cuba diplomatically and economically.

In 1962, fear of an American invasion made the Cuban leadership receptive to Khrushchev's proposal to deploy Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. Castro agreed, though was keen to emphasize Cuba's role in the anti-imperialist struggle. When the US discovered the missiles in October 1962, the world moved to the brink of nuclear catastrophe. Castro embraced the cause of 'Homeland or Death' and was willing to fight a nuclear war in the cause of anti-imperialism. Khrushchev, however, was desperate to avoid nuclear war and failed to consult Castro on the deal with Kennedy to withdraw the missiles. Intensive Soviet efforts were needed to assuage Fidel's anger and restore relations, reflecting Castro's view that Cuba was an ally not a client of the USSR. Later, Cuba emerged as a prominent member of the 120-strong Non-Aligned Movement.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 did not persuade Fidel Castro to abandon the Cuban revolution. *El Barbudo* continued to forge new political and economic relations with fellow-minded revolutionaries in Latin America, notably in Nicaragua and Venezuela. Rapprochement with Washington during the twentieth century remained unforthcoming.

Question 1: Was confrontation between Castro's revolution and the United States inevitable?

Question 2: How will history remember Fidel Castro?

4.4.3 1969–79: the rise and fall of détente

As American military involvement in Vietnam deepened, Soviet–Chinese relations were deteriorating. Indeed by 1969, a territorial dispute led to significant military clashes between the PRC and the USSR. Such tensions assisted the foundations of **détente** between Moscow and Washington, and helped facilitate **rapprochement** between Beijing and Washington. Détente in Europe originated from the **Ostpolitik** of the German Socialist Chancellor, Willy Brandt, and resulted in agreements that recognized the peculiar

Case Study 4.2 The city of Berlin 1945–89

Checkpoint Charlie (Checkpoint C) crossing point between East and West Berlin during the Berlin Crisis of 1961
© Universal Art Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Berlin began and ended the twentieth century as the capital of a united Germany. After 1945, the city became a crucible of the cold war. In 1948 and 1961, it provided the focus for confrontations that risked war between East and West.

During the war, the allies agreed to divide Germany into zones of occupation, pending an eventual political settlement. Berlin was governed between the Soviet, American, British, and French. The city, however, was 120 miles deep in the Soviet zone. After Stalin objected to the merger of the three western sectors, he attempted to end joint administration by a blockade of communications with West Berlin.

Between June 1948 and May 1949 (when the blockade was called off) West Berlin was supplied by American and British aircraft with food, fuel, and medicine. The population of West Berlin (and its peculiar political status) survived. In 1958, Nikita Khrushchev resolved to settle its anomalous status by threatening a peace treaty with East Germany and making Berlin 'a free city'. In June 1961, he repeated the threat to President Kennedy at their summit in Vienna. In NATO eyes, the security of West Berlin (and West Germany) rested on America's willingness to use nuclear weapons against the USSR in the event of Soviet aggression. As West Berlin could not be defended by conventional forces, Kennedy would have to choose between nuclear war and surrendering the city: 'holocaust or humiliation'.

Meanwhile, the exodus of refugees from East to West Berlin accelerated. Faced with economic catastrophe, Khrushchev accepted East German demands to close the border (which occurred on the night of 13 August 1961). The Berlin Wall staunched the haemorrhage of skilled workers at political cost to Moscow's credibility (and at a humanitarian cost of those killed attempting to flee west). The problem of Berlin was not, however, resolved. In October 1961, a concatenation of local events precipitated confrontation between American and Soviet tanks at Checkpoint Charlie. Some US and Soviet officials thought these events more dangerous than the Cuban crisis in 1962. Back-channel diplomacy and superpower choreography enabled Kennedy and Khrushchev to draw back without losing face, in a confrontation neither had planned or anticipated.

After the Cuban missile crisis, relations between Washington and Moscow improved and Berlin was no longer the locus of confrontation. Political leaders, notably the erstwhile mayor of Berlin, Willy Brandt, pursued détente, which led to the Quadripartite Agreement in 1971 that facilitated recognition of East Germany and effective acceptance of existing borders.

Subsequently, the seismic changes wrought by the collapse of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe brought the prospect of German reunification. In November 1989, the people of Berlin began to dismantle the Wall, symbolizing the end of the cold war. Within a year, Germany was reunified, and soon Berlin regained its status as its capital.

Question 1: Why was West Berlin so important in the cold war?

Question 2: Examine and evaluate Western policy towards Berlin from 1945 to 1989.

status of Berlin and the sovereignty of East Germany. Soviet–American détente had its roots in mutual recognition of the need to avoid nuclear crises, and in the economic and military incentives to avoid an unconstrained arms race.

In the West, détente was associated with the political leadership of President Richard Nixon and his adviser Henry Kissinger (both of whom were also instrumental in Sino-American rapprochement). During this phase in Soviet–American relations, each side pursued political goals, some of which were increasingly incompatible with the aspirations of the other superpower. Both supported friendly regimes and movements, and both subverted adversaries. Détente came as political upheavals were taking place in the Third World (**see Table 4.3**). The question of to what extent the superpowers could control their friends, and to what extent they were entangled by their commitments, was underlined in 1973 when the Arab–Israeli war embroiled Washington and Moscow in a potentially dangerous confrontation. Getting the superpowers involved in the war—whether by design or by serendipity—nevertheless helped to create the political conditions for Egyptian–Israeli rapprochement. Diplomatic and strategic relations were transformed as Egypt switched allegiance from Moscow to Washington. In the short term, Egypt was isolated in the Arab world. For Israel, fear of a war of annihilation fought on two fronts was

Table 4.3 Revolutionary upheavals in the Third World, 1974–80

Ethiopia	Overthrow of Haile Selassie	Sept. 1974
Cambodia	Khmer Rouge takes Phnom Penh	April 1975
Vietnam	North Vietnam/'Viet Cong' take Saigon	April 1975
Laos	Pathet Lao takes over state	May 1975
Guinea-Bissau	Independence from Portugal	Sept. 1974
Mozambique	Independence from Portugal	June 1975
Cape Verde	Independence from Portugal	June 1975
São Tomé	Independence from Portugal	June 1975
Angola	Independence from Portugal	Nov. 1975
Afghanistan	Military coup	April 1978
Iran	Ayatollah Khomeini installed in power	Feb. 1979
Grenada	New Jewel Movement takes power	March 1979
Nicaragua	Sandinistas take Managua	July 1979
Zimbabwe	Independence from Britain	April 1980

Source: Halliday (1986): 92.

lifted. Yet continuing political violence and terrorism, and enduring enmity between Israel and other Arab states, proved insurmountable obstacles to a regional settlement.

Soviet support for revolutionary movements in the Third World reflected Moscow's self-confidence as a superpower and its analysis that the Third World was turning towards Marxism-Leninism. Ideological competition with the West and with China ensued. In America, this was viewed as evidence of Soviet duplicity. Some claimed that Moscow's support for revolutionary forces in Ethiopia in 1975 killed détente. Others cited the Soviet role in Angola in 1978, where Moscow supplied arms and helped transport Cuban troops to support the Marxists. The perception that Moscow was using arms control to gain military advantage was linked to Soviet behaviour in the Third World. Growing Soviet military superiority was reflected in increasing Soviet influence, it was argued. Critics claimed that the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) process failed to prevent the Soviets from deploying multiple independently targetable warheads on large intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), threatening key American forces. The United States faced a 'window of vulnerability', they claimed. The view from Moscow was different, reflecting divergent assumptions about the scope and purpose of détente and the nature of nuclear deterrence. Other events weakened American influence. The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 resulted in the loss of an important Western regional ally, although the subsequent revolutionary Islamic government was hostile to both superpowers.

December 1979 marked a point of transition in East–West affairs. NATO agreed to deploy land-based Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe if negotiations with Moscow did not reduce what NATO saw as serious military imbalances. Later that month, Soviet armed forces intervened in Afghanistan to support the USSR's revolutionary allies. Moscow was bitterly condemned in the West and in the Third World, and became embroiled in a protracted and bloody struggle that many compared to America's war in Vietnam. In Washington, President Jimmy Carter's view of Moscow changed dramatically. He withdrew the SALT II Treaty from Senate ratification, sought an international boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, and announced the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force for use in an area stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, Republicans increasingly used foreign and defence policy to attack the Carter presidency. Perceptions of American weakness permeated US domestic politics, and in 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected president, committed to a more confrontational approach with Moscow on arms control, conflicts in the Third World, and East–West relations in general.

4.4.4 1979–86: 'the second cold war'

In the West, critics of détente and arms control argued that the Soviets were acquiring nuclear superiority. Some suggested that the United States should pursue strategies based on the idea that victory in nuclear war was possible. Reagan's election in 1980 was a watershed in Soviet–American relations. He inherited the issue of nuclear missiles in Europe, which loomed large in the breakdown of relations between East and West. Changes in the strategic and European nuclear 'balances' had generated new anxieties in the West about the credibility of extended deterrence (**see Table 4.4**). NATO's resulting decision to deploy land-based missiles capable of striking Soviet territory precipitated great tension in relations between NATO and the USSR, and political friction within NATO. Reagan's own incautious public remarks reinforced perceptions that he was ill-informed and dangerous in nuclear matters, although key arms policies were largely consistent

Table 4.4 Principal nuclear weapons states: number of intact nuclear warheads, 1945–90

	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
USA	6	369	3,057	20,434	31,982	26,662	27,826	24,304	24,327	21,004
USSR	–	5	200	1,605	6,129	11,643	19,055	30,062	39,197	37,000
UK	–	–	10	30	310	280	350	350	300	300
France	–	–	–	–	32	36	188	250	360	505
PRC	–	–	–	–	5	75	185	280	425	430
Total	6	374	3,267	22,069	38,458	38,696	47,604	55,246	64,609	59,239

Source: Norris and Kristensen (2006): 66.

with those of his predecessor, Jimmy Carter. However, Reagan was uninterested in agreements that would freeze the status quo for the sake of reaching accord, and Soviet and American negotiators proved unable to make progress in talks on long-range and intermediate-range weapons. One particular idea had significant consequences for arms control and for Washington's relations with both allies and adversaries. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), quickly dubbed 'Star Wars', was a research programme designed to explore the feasibility of space-based defences against ballistic missiles. The Soviets appeared to take SDI very seriously; they claimed that Reagan's real purpose was to regain the American nuclear monopoly of the 1940s. Reagan himself retained an idiosyncratic attachment to SDI, which he believed could make nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete. However, the technological advances claimed by SDI proponents did not materialize and the programme was eventually reduced and marginalized.

The ensuing period of superpower confrontation between 1979 and 1986 has been described as the **second cold war** and compared to the early period of confrontation between 1946 and 1953. In both Western Europe and the USSR there was fear of nuclear war, much of which reflected a reaction to the rhetoric and policies of the Reagan administration. American statements on nuclear weapons, and military interventions in Grenada (1983) and against Libya (1986), were seen as evidence of a new belligerence. Reagan's policy towards Central America, and support for the rebel Contras in Nicaragua, generated controversy in America and internationally. In 1986, the International Court of Justice found the United States guilty of violating international law for the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) covert attacks on Nicaraguan harbours.

The Reagan administration's use of military power was nonetheless limited: rhetoric and perceptions were at variance with political action. Some overseas operations ended in humiliating failure, notably in Lebanon in 1983. Nevertheless, there is evidence that some in the Soviet leadership took seriously the Reagan administration's words (and deeds) and became anxious that Washington might be planning a nuclear first strike. In 1983, Soviet air defences shot down a South Korean civilian airliner in Soviet airspace. The American reaction, and imminent deployment of American nuclear missiles in Europe, created a climate of great tension in East–West relations. Some historians believe that in November 1983 Soviet intelligence may have misinterpreted a NATO training exercise (codenamed 'Able Archer') leading to fear in Moscow that NATO was preparing an attack. How close the world came to a serious nuclear confrontation in 1983 remains a subject of debate (**see Table 4.5**).

Throughout the early 1980s, the Soviets were handicapped by a succession of aging political leaders (Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko), whose ill-health further inhibited Soviet foreign policy. This changed dramatically after Mikhail Gorbachev became premier in 1985. Gorbachev's 'new thinking' in foreign policy, together with domestic reforms, created a revolution in Moscow's foreign relations and within Soviet society. At home, **glasnost** (or openness) and **perestroika** (or restructuring) unleashed nationalist forces that, to Gorbachev's dismay, helped bring about the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Table 4.5 Cold war crises

1948–9	Berlin	USSR/US/UK/France
1954–5	Taiwan straits	US/PRC
1961	Berlin	USSR/US/NATO
1962	Cuba	USSR/US/Cuba
1973	Arab–Israeli war	Egypt/Israel/Syria/Jordan/US/USSR
1983	Exercise 'Able Archer'	USSR/US/NATO

Gorbachev's aim in foreign policy was to transform international relations, most importantly with the United States. His domestic agenda also catalysed change in Eastern Europe, though, unlike Khrushchev, he was not prepared to use force or coercion. When confronted with revolt in Eastern Europe, Gorbachev's foreign ministry invoked Frank Sinatra's song 'I Did it My Way' to revoke the **Brezhnev doctrine** that had earlier limited Eastern European sovereignty and political development. The **Sinatra doctrine** meant Eastern Europeans were now allowed to 'do it their way'. Moscow-aligned regimes gave way to democracies, in what was, for the most part, a peaceful as well as speedy transition (**see Ch. 5**). Most dramatically, Germany was united and the East German state (the German Democratic Republic) disappeared.

Gorbachev pursued arms agreements that helped ease tensions that had characterized the early 1980s. In 1987, he travelled to Washington to sign the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, banning intermediate-range nuclear missiles, including Cruise and Pershing II. While this agreement was heralded as a triumph for the Soviet premier, NATO leaders, including Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, argued that it vindicated the policies pursued by NATO since 1979. The INF Treaty was concluded more quickly than a new agreement on cutting strategic nuclear weapons, in part because of continuing Soviet opposition to SDI. Instead, it was Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, who concluded a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement reducing long-range nuclear weapons (though only back to the level they had been in the early 1980s). Gorbachev used agreements on nuclear weapons to build trust and to demonstrate the serious and radical nature of his purpose. However, despite agreements on conventional forces in Europe (culminating in the Paris Agreement of 1990), the end of the cold war marked success in nuclear arms control rather than nuclear disarmament (**see Table 4.6**). The histories of the cold war and nuclear weapons are connected very closely, but while the cold war is over, nuclear weapons are still very much with us (**see Opposing Opinions 4.1**).

Table 4.6 Principal arms control and disarmament agreements

Treaty	Purpose of agreement	Signed	Parties
Geneva protocol	Banned use of chemical weapons	1925	140
Partial Test Ban Treaty	Banned atmospheric, underwater, outer-space nuclear tests	1963	125+
Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty	Limited spread of nuclear weapons	1968	190+
Biological Weapons Convention	Banned production/use	1972	180+
SALT I Treaty	Limited strategic arms*	1972	US/USSR
ABM Treaty	Limited anti-ballistic missiles	1972	US/USSR
SALT II Treaty	Limited strategic arms*	1979	US/USSR
INF Treaty	Banned two categories of land-based missiles	1987	US/USSR
START 1 Treaty	Reduced strategic arms*	1990	US/USSR
START 2 Treaty	Banned multiple independent re-entry vehicles (MIRVs)	1993	US/USSR
Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty	Banned all nuclear tests in all environments	1996	180+

* Strategic arms are long-range weapons.
Source: adapted from Harvard Nuclear Study Group (1985): 96.

Key Points

- Disagreements remain about when and why the cold war began, and who was responsible. Distinct phases can be discerned in East–West relations, during which tension and the risk of direct confrontation grew and receded.
- Some civil and regional wars were intensified and prolonged by superpower involvement; others may have been prevented or shortened.
- Nuclear weapons were an important factor in the cold war. To what extent their development had a momentum of its own is a matter of debate. Agreements on limiting and controlling the growth of nuclear arsenals played an important role in Soviet–American (and East–West) relations.
- The end of the cold war did not result in the abolition of nuclear weapons.
- Various international crises occurred in which there was risk of nuclear war. How close we came to catastrophe at these times remains open to debate.

Opposing Opinions 4.1 During the cold war, the benefits of nuclear weapons outweighed their costs and risks

For

Nuclear deterrence kept the peace. European conflicts in the twentieth century resulted in devastating wars that killed many millions. Nuclear weapons helped prevent war in Europe (and elsewhere).

Mutually assured destruction (MAD) provided a form of stability. Both sides knew they could not win a nuclear war, but to ensure this, each needed to threaten retaliation on a devastating scale.

The bomb was cheap. Conventional defences were far more expensive than nuclear armaments. In the West, nuclear weapons proved less costly than traditional armed forces, in both money and personnel. They therefore contributed to economic growth and social stability.

Cold war arms agreements reduced the risks and costs of the arms race. Negotiated agreements helped provide strategic stability by establishing greater equality in numbers and reducing fears of nuclear first strikes. Soviet–American arms control eased political tensions in various phases of the cold war, most importantly during détente in the 1960s and 1970s. Specific agreements stopped nuclear testing in the atmosphere (1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty) and eliminated specific categories of nuclear weapons (1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty).

Against

The bomb increased East–West political tensions and heightened the threat of war. Nuclear weapons helped breed mutual fear and hostility. They contributed to the cold war antagonism that helped create global conflict. Yet, at the same time, the Korean and Vietnam wars were neither prevented nor ended by nuclear weapons. States without nuclear weapons were often not deterred from attacking those with nuclear weapons.

Arms control did not lead to disarmament. Cold war nuclear arsenals grew in size and sophistication. Arms control legitimized the possession of nuclear weapons and encouraged proliferation. During the 1980s, nuclear weapons technologies became a key focus of Soviet–American anxiety. The end of the cold war did not lead to nuclear disarmament.

Twentieth-century nuclear crises demonstrated that misinformation, misjudgement, and miscalculation by political leaders risked 'inadvertent' nuclear war. Those risks were increased by the delegation of nuclear authority to subordinate military commanders. Potential failures of command control remained a persistent concern throughout the cold war (and beyond).

Nuclear weapons carry dire environmental implications. Global nuclear war would have led to global environmental catastrophe and the prospect of a 'nuclear winter' that could have virtually extinguished all human life.

1. Do you believe it was morally acceptable to threaten the use of nuclear weapons against cities during the cold war?
2. Was it the good judgement of political leaders or good luck that best explains how we avoided nuclear war during the cold war?
3. What do you think were the main achievements of Soviet–American arms control agreements during the cold war?

Visit the online resources to discover pointers to help you tackle these questions.

4.5 Conclusion

The changes that took place in twentieth-century world politics were enormous. Assessing their significance raises many complex issues about the nature of international history and international relations. How did war come about in 1914? What accounts for the rise of Hitler? What were the origins, dynamics, and costs of the cold war? These questions have generated robust debate and fierce controversy. This conclusion emphasizes several points about the relationship between total war, end of empire, and cold war. However war broke out in 1914, the transformation of warfare into industrialized total war reflected a combination of technological, political, and social forces. Subsequently, political leaders proved incapable of restoring peace and stability; attempts to reconstruct the European state system after 1919 failed to address enduring problems while creating new obstacles to a stable order. The rise of Nazi Germany brought global conflagration and new methods of fighting and killing. The scale of carnage and suffering was unprecedented. Nazi ideas of racial supremacy resulted in brutality and mass murder across Europe and culminated in genocide against the Jews. One consequence

was the creation of Israel, which set in motion conflicts that continue to have global repercussions today. In the 1930s, the rise of an expansionist military regime in Tokyo likewise portended protracted and brutal war across the Pacific.

The period since 1945 witnessed the end of European empires constructed before, and in the early part of, the twentieth century, and saw the rise and fall of the cold war. The relationship between the end of empire and cold war conflict in the Third World was a close, though complex, one. In some cases, involvement of the superpowers helped bring change. In others, it resulted in escalation and prolongation of conflict. Marxist ideology in various forms provided inspiration to liberation movements in the Third World, and provocation to the United States (and others). The Vietnam war was the most obvious example of this. Precisely how the cold war affected decolonization is best assessed on a case-by-case basis, but one key issue is the extent to which the objectives of revolutionary leaders and movements were nationalist rather than Marxist. It is claimed that both Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Fidel Castro in Cuba were primarily nationalists, who turned to Moscow and to communism only in response to Western hostility. Divisions between Moscow and Beijing also demonstrated diverging trends in the practice of Marxism. In several instances, conflict between communists became as bitter as that between communists and capitalists. In other areas, notably the Middle East, Marxism faced the challenge of pan-Arabism and revolutionary Islam, which held greater attraction for the peoples involved. Superpower involvement was more complex and diffuse, though in moments of crisis nevertheless significant.

Similarly, the relationship between the cold war and nuclear history is close, though often complex. Some historians contend that the use of atomic weapons played a decisive part in the origins of the cold war. Others see the prospect of annihilation as central to understanding Soviet defence and foreign policy, and the unprecedented threat of devastation as crucial to understanding the mutual hostility and fear of leaders in the nuclear age. Yet it is also argued that without nuclear weapons, direct Soviet–American conflict would have been much more likely, and had nuclear weapons not acted as a deterrent, war in Europe could have happened. Still others contend that nuclear weapons played a limited role in East–West relations, and that their importance is exaggerated.

Nuclear weapons have, nevertheless, constituted a focus for political agreement, and during détente, arms agreements acted as the currency of international politics. Yet how close we came to nuclear war in 1961 (Berlin), or 1962 (Cuba), or 1973 (Arab–Israeli war), or 1983 (Exercise 'Able Archer'), and what lessons might be learned from these events, are crucial questions for historians and policy-makers alike. One central issue concerns the extent to which cold war perspectives and involvement of nuclear-armed superpowers imposed stability in regions where previous instability had led to conflict and war. The cold war may have produced unprecedented concentrations of military and nuclear forces in Europe, but it was also a period characterized by stability and great economic prosperity, certainly in the West.

Both the cold war and the age of empire are over, though across the globe their legacies—good and bad, seen and unseen—persist. The age of 'the bomb', and of other weapons of mass destruction (chemical and biological), continues. To what extent the clash of communist and liberal/capitalist ideologies helped facilitate or retard globalization is a matter for reflection. Despite the limitations of the human imagination, the global consequences of nuclear war remain all too real. The accident at the Soviet nuclear reactor at Chernobyl in 1986 demonstrated that radioactivity knows no national boundaries. In the 1980s, scientists suggested that the explosion of even a fraction of the world's nuclear weapons over a fraction of the world's cities could end life itself in the northern hemisphere. While the threat of strategic nuclear war has receded, the global problem of nuclear weapons remains a common and urgent concern for humanity in the twenty-first century.